

Elders—Who and What?

THE OPENING LECTURE.

PRINCIPAL MACVICAR SPEAKS—ELDERSHIP THE HIGHEST OFFICE—YOUNGER MEN WANTED—ELDERS SHOULD GO TO COLLEGE—LIFE-LONG TERMS OF OFFICE UNDESIRABLE.

A large and intelligent audience was assembled in the David Morrice Hall on Wednesday night, October 3rd, to hear the opening lecture of the session. Shortly after eight o'clock, as the air was filled with melodious strains from the belfry, the students robed in academicals climbed the stairway from the reception rooms below and entered the hall, marching up the aisle to the seats reserved for undergraduates. The members of Senate and Faculty followed and took more prominent positions on the platform. The Rev. Dr. King, Moderator of the General Assembly, occupied the chair, and was supported on his right and left respectively by David Morrice, Esquire, and Principal Macvicar, D.D., LL.D.

The Chairman having announced the metrical version of the 67th Psalm, it was heartily sung under the leadership of Prof. John McLaren; the Rev. A. B. Mackay, of Crescent Street Church, read a portion of the 68th Psalm; after which the Chairman led in prayer.

Principal Macvicar then stepped forward and delivered an elaborate lecture on the "Office and Work of the Elder." We make the following extracts from the *Witness*, which, with laudable enterprise, published the lecture in full:—

Looked at in the light of Scripture we note the following points:

I. Elders are called of God's Spirit to this office. No man should take this honor to himself unless he is called of God, as was Aaron. Hence elders should be men separated and consecrated in heart and life to the Lord, clearly and distinctly known by their high vocation; good men, undoubtedly, but also men of superior intelligence, and if they have not enjoyed the advantages of a liberal education, yet certainly characterized by spiritual insight and culture in Divine things, for every good creature whose name stands on the roll of the church and seems pious and inoffensive is not fit to be an elder any more than godless ones of high social rank and position. Neither mere harmlessness nor obtrusive force and forwardness can qualify a man for this office.

An elder should, without doubt, be a child of God,—called, justified and accepted of God. He should be fully persuaded that he is forgiven, that he has received new life from the Spirit of God—that he is a temple of the Holy Ghost—that he is taught and led by the Spirit of Christ; for "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of his"—and if none of his what business has he with the eldership, or any office in the church?

But more than this, he should feel himself inwardly called—moved by a Divine impulse acting upon his soul to undertake this work. This, in reality, is his true title to the office; for God by His Holy Spirit first of all qualifies men to be ministers, or elders, and the Church merely calls to active service and trains those who are thus divinely fitted for it.

But can a man discover that he is thus called? Certainly. Does not a man know his own mind? Does he not know what he is moved to do, or to abstain from doing? Do not even wicked men know and understand very distinctly that they are impelled by evil impulses to pursue evil courses? And cannot good men know thoroughly that they are moved by Divine power to a life of holiness? There is no necessity for wrapping up the subject in impenetrable mystery. When God calls a man to this office he is intelligently and calmly moved thereto in his own soul; and on due reflection he discovers that he possesses in some degree the qualifications of heart and head which are needed for the discharge of the duties he feels willing to undertake. So much for one point. I remark:

II. That elders are called to this office by the voice of the people.

First, called inwardly, called in heart and soul, by God's Spirit—then called outwardly by God's people—this is the Divine order.

How do we know? We know it from the Word which is the only rule we can accept in settling all such matters. They are not determined by legislative enactments of the State, by the voice of Church Courts, or by ancient custom, but only by the Word of the Lord.

And do you not see propriety, safety and wisdom in this Divine order?

Propriety, for surely it is right, seemly and beautiful, that every member of the body of Christ, every one included in the communion of the church should take part in making choice of those who are to hold office. This seems necessary in order to interest all the members, to draw them out in sympathy and prayer, and to get a fair expression of

the collective wisdom of the church in the matter; and I have observed, after an experience of over twenty years, that the Lord guides his people in the exercise of this right so as to secure the very best results.

There is safety also in this order, for, suppose some weak and conceited enthusiasts should appear in a church claiming to be called of God and pre-eminently qualified to teach and to rule, this election by the people is an effectual check upon their folly. Although these pragmatical enthusiasts may be beside themselves the whole church can scarcely be imagined in this condition, and hence the Lord will restrain them by the hand of his people declining to call them to office. They may then be elected to remain in the ranks, and may possibly "study to be quiet and do their own business."

But there is more than propriety and safety in this order, there is Divine wisdom. The Lord knows that it is good for congregations to make the effort to find among themselves suitable persons to be elders. It will compel them to know one another better than is usually the case, and this is a sort of compulsion that may be very beneficial in most churches. It will reveal to them how rich or how poor they are in spiritual gifts. If they discover a dozen or a score of men eminently fitted for this office and willing to undertake its duties, then they are rich indeed, and should give God thanks. But if they can scarcely find any one to serve the Lord in this capacity it is not plain that they should seek more spiritual life and power from on high?

But this is not all; see God's wisdom in asking the people to make choice of elders in the fact that thereby they become responsible to them and for them. We can therefore say to the people, You have placed these elders over yourselves voluntarily and, therefore, you should find it natural and easy to honor and obey them in the Lord. You have deliberately given them this place and you must not contradict your own act by disregarding them. Nay, more, you are responsible for them.

They are your elders, and if they are not such as they should be you are to blame, and hence, instead of finding fault, you should confess your fault and be incessant in supplications to God in their behalf, and most energetic in your efforts to second all their holy endeavors and to crown their labors with success.

See, then, the goodness and wisdom of Christ our Saviour in this arrangement by which elders are not only called of His Spirit, but also called of His people to their sacred office. I remark:

III. That elders thus called of God and elected by His flock are also ordained to office. But what is ordination? There are many vague and superstitious notions entertained about this matter. We may say in a word that ordination is an act of the Church through her proper office-bearers, by which, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, she invests a man with sacred office, and sets him apart for the discharge of its duties.

The main thing, the thing deemed essential, is that the Church by her proper officers do solemnly, and in the name of Christ, signify her recognition of the call of the Holy Ghost addressed to certain persons, and the choice of the people in regularly calling such persons to office. We thus avoid two injurious extremes, that which makes far too little and that which makes far too much of ordination, the error, namely, of Plymouthists on the one hand, and Sacramentarians on the other. It is manifestly an ignoring of Scripture to deny the fact and the significance of ordination and consequently the office of elder altogether. This is surely going too far in one direction. Equally unscriptural is it to exalt ordination to the rank of a sacrament and to regard the New Testament elder as a priest and to pretend to say that every so-called priest can trace his ecclesiastical pedigree all the way down from the Apostles through an unbroken line of outward succession. Such pretensions are surely an outrage upon common sense and an insult to every intelligent student of history. And yet we must add that upon these two notions, that of ascribing sacramental efficacy to the simple rite of ordination, and that of substituting priests for elders and claiming for them, without being able to prove it in a single case, apostolic succession, rests the whole fabric of modern ritualism and hierarchical absolutism.

We have far too much autocracy or one man power in our congregations. We who preach fail to see that it is our business specially to organize, to call forth, to employ and direct all the sanctified talent of the church, and especially of our fellow elders. Instead of attempting to do all things ourselves, we should have everybody, young and old, busily serving the Lord in some capacity. Instead of having a vast amount of unemployed talent going to waste and becoming injurious for want of use, just as we have in the hands of our people millions of dollars utterly unavailable for the Lord's purposes, instead of this, I say, we should constantly aim at having the whole Church a living scene of Christian liberality and spiritual activity. Why should ministers alone undertake not only to fill the pulpit but also to manage the Sunday-school, the Bible class, the prayer meeting, and look after the poor, the sick and the dying? Why should people and elders allow them, or force them to have such a monopoly of spiritual functions?

It was far otherwise in the days of the Apostle James when he said, "Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him."

Instead of this it seems now to be assumed in many quarters that the minister should be endowed with a sort of omniscience by which he can